

MY LIFE AS A DOG

A year in the life of a first time writer/director

by Ira Israel
June 1996

So you've just finished the final first draft of a screenplay that you would like to direct and you're going to try to find a producer to produce your screenplay into a film. Maybe you've gone to film school, maybe you've made a short film, maybe you haven't - it doesn't matter. If you're uncle is not a studio head, then we're in the same boat.

With the exception of limited time that I spent writing screenplays with two other writer/directors, I spent 1995 "developing" my first independent feature film as if it were a full-time 40 hour per week job. It is. Supposedly I have done and am doing everything "right", or at least that is what I continuously hear. Although my project could go into production any day now, I don't feel much closer to making the film than I was a year ago. I consider the time I have spent - as well as the thousands of dollars on copies, telephone calls, faxes, business meals, research, and postage - to be the equivalent of taking a course on how to get a low-budget independent film off the ground. Here are some things I've learned as a first time writer/director of an independent feature trying to find a producer:

#1: Call everybody, big or small. When you're trying to get your project off of the ground you cannot afford to be shy. Ask everyone you know. Go to the library, bookstore, AIFV, IFP, and get lists of producers. Independent producers, individuals, studios - you cannot afford to leave any stone unturned. Find out who they are and what they've done. Ask professional, intelligent questions about the company or individual's interests, the type of material that they are looking for, and if they read unsolicited scripts. Ninety percent of producers have an emotional bodyguard, usually in the form of a young receptionist who wields her phone like a mighty scepter. She has been trained to say two things: "Hello, we don't accept unsolicited material" and when you inquire how to get material solicited she'll reply, "It must come through an agent or attorney. Goodbye."

To the bodyguard's credit I will say this: I imagine that most production companies are besieged with lunatics calling, recounting complete fabrications, being rude, and asking inane questions. You don't not want to be perceived as one of the above.

Because you must understand that this young woman is a. nobody and b. wrong. She has been paid and trained to allow the producers to avoid speaking with you. Very few production companies accept only material through agents or attorneys. The key is getting past the bodyguard and getting your someone interested in your project.

#2. Never send anybody anything unless s/he specifically ask for it. Not once, not ever. No “Oh let’s just see what happens...” I’ll tell you what happens: it goes directly into the garbage. Producers know what they want to see and are already overwhelmed by the material that they solicit. You don’t need to waste your hard-earned money just to receive a letter stating “Egg Pictures does not accept unsolicited material. We return it to you unread. Best of luck with all of your future endeavors!”

#3. How do I get my material solicited? Firstly, know your material; know your screenplay inside and out. Know how to speak about it. Know how to pitch it in one sentence. Know who your potential audience is. Then know how to describe all of the major plot twists in a few key phrases such as, “First plot twist: guy returns to his office after getting lunch, everyone has been killed, doesn’t know what to do, can’t call the police so he calls his big boss who tells him to come in. But maybe it was the big boss who wiped out the office? Our guy is afraid, doesn’t know what to do so he takes off. Second plot twist, he kidnaps a stranger, etc.” Be as precise and confident as possible and try not to refer to other films. The jokes from the first scene of “The Player” are funny because they are real. You have no idea how many people call up producers and say “It’s Forest Gump meets The Godfather meets City Slickers.” Don’t do it - you’ll sound stupid and inexperienced. Also, if by chance you happen to cite films such as “sex, lies, and videotape”, “The Brother McMullen”, or “Clerks”, then you’ll sound even more stupid and inexperienced because those films are anachronisms, meaning that for each one of those success stories there are a hundred films - possibly even films of similar quality - that never got domestic distribution and/or lost large amounts of money.

Have a realistic budget in mind. When you’re just starting out nobody expects you to hire a line producer and draft a ten or twenty page budget; however, know the budgets of movies that have a similar look, feel, number of principal actors, and number of locations and be able to give a ballpark figure (without referring to these films).

Know who to speak to. You won’t be able to speak to her, but find out who she is nonetheless. As a matter of fact, you’ll never speak to her unless she actually reads and likes your screenplay which is highly unlikely; you’ll speak to her assistant, but you should still know who she is. She is a D-girl, a development girl, and like the bodyguard she is paid to shield the higher orders from pests like you. It’s not that

she doesn't have some power, it's just that she is not going to use it to help you. Ever. Helping you would mean risking her job, health insurance, limited expense account, etc. She is not here to help you, she is here to keep her job, as you would do if you had that job.

So try your best to meet her. Here's the reason: it's more difficult to reject a face than a name. If there's a face with the project, preferably a human face, preferably your face, then maybe D-girl will be so kind as to print a copy of Rejection Letter #2 (which starts off positive) or actually call you herself to tell you that "it's not for them at this time".

But you'll never meet her unless she's already the friend of a friend. Thus you must write her letters, send her faxes, call her Ms., - in general, suck up to her - do anything to get her to know at least your name. Letters should be exquisitely written, without any grammatical or typographical errors. You're essentially telling her that it is worth her time to read your work; the letter is obviously a sample of your writing style and ability, so make it as articulate, forthright, and honest as possible.

Then lie. Lie like a rug. Not about the nature of the project but about who you're "approaching", who is "reading" the screenplay, who is "considering" the project. You're marketing yourself and you must entice her into wanting to read your work. The best way to do this is to use the same marketing technique that film, record, book companies use: *Over a gazillion people have seen our movie, heard our record, read our book - why are you missing out, are you a complete loser??!!!*

If she is blatantly not interested in your project then ask if she knows who might be interested. Most D-girls will gladly give you the names of some competitors and enemies whose valuable time she would like you to waste. She'll probably say, "Sounds more like a project for Goldwyn than for us." Then you'll spend a day finding out that Samuel Goldwyn is no longer producing. However, sometimes some of her suggestions will actually help you because then you can call the competing D-girl and insinuate that you're amidst discussions with the other company: "I just got off the phone with Violet Rose over in development at Miramax and I thought I'd give you a call..."

Another even longer shot - this approach is essentially futile which is why I'll only discuss it in passing: Try to get a reputable agent to represent your work. I've earned my living for the past five years working on screenplays for films that have been produced for \$85 million dollars, \$17 million dollars, \$15 million dollars, and \$13 million dollars and I wrote and directed an award-winning short film and only once has an agent accepted my phone call and agreed to meet with me. After a few weeks he sent me a one line letter stating that my work did not "grip" him.

A. Let the agents come to you.

B. Scorsese's rule that you don't need an agent unless you're earning over \$100,000 is valid, and

C. Even if you sign with a powerful agent s/he probably won't have the time or the inclination to do anything for you until you get your own work. This is the first Catch-22 of the entertainment industry: "I can't get the gig I'm looking for without an agent - an agent won't sign me unless I'm already working on a big (high profile) gig." It's almost as much fun as trying to sign to the WGA or DGA.

Another even longer shot: Private and Public Grants & Subsidies for independent filmmakers. Are you a handicapped African-American lesbian making a documentary on Tibetan monks dying of AIDS? Then forget about. Yes, most civilized countries have organizations that are designed to support independent filmmakers; unfortunately, you are probably not a citizen of one of those countries.

#4. So a D-girl finally agrees to read your screenplay. Which means that her company will pay \$40-\$90 for someone - with credentials not unlike yourself - to do "coverage" on your screenplay. Which means that some jealous wannabe screenwriter will read your screenplay, write a two page synopsis, and critique the shit out of it. I've never seen or heard about favorable coverage. Ever. Paid readers must constantly assert their intelligence and the only way to do this is to be condescending and overly critical; they're freelance and powerless so they have little to lose. This is the second line of defense for the producers after their bodyguard/receptionist; the large amount of money that producers spend on coverage saves them valuable time developing projects that may or may not be worthwhile. In fact, as with most criticism, the critique most often tells more about the person doing coverage than the screenwriter or the work. If you're ever privy to a film company's files, spend an afternoon just for fun reading coverage on screenplays submitted to them. Ninety percent of the categories will be checked "fair" or "poor" with a few seemingly random "average" checks under character development or dialogue so that the reader maintains the guise of objectivity or even leniency. Don't get distraught over bad coverage: it is not in a paid reader's interest to promote anything other than his/her own writing skills.

Releases: most of the better companies (the companies that have been around long enough to have already been sued) will ask you to sign a release before they agree to read your work. This is totally perfunctory; just sign it and send it back with the screenplay. Don't bother your parents', your friends', or your own attorney about the release - just sign it and send it back with the screenplay. You have no choice: releases are non-negotiable.

OK, so you've written or typed a "Thank you for agreeing to read my screenplay" letter, and put it in a nice envelope with a fresh copy of your bound masterpiece and your well-padded resume. I suggest sending it by first class US mail (\$3.00) unless the project is so hot that the producer is willing to give you his/her Fed-Ex number or send a messenger. This happens occasionally and it'll make you feel good but it doesn't mean that they're going to look at your project any sooner; it just means that it's going to sit there longer (and so are you). Important: save all of your postage as well as copy receipts or your accountant will slay you.

Next comes the first follow-up phone call: "I'm just calling to make sure that you received the screenplay." Of course they received it, but nonetheless after a week or so call in order to gauge how fast they'll do coverage on it and when you can expect to hear from them.

Nothing important happens in the film industry via U.S. mail. The only thing that you'll ever receive in your mailbox from a production company will be a rejection letter. All positive notifications happen by telephone. Thus, don't run to your mailbox every day - no news really is good news.

More follow-up phone calls: "It's on the top of her pile" is what you'll most often hear. You can call once a week, maybe on Monday to see if she read it over the weekend or on Friday to subtly remind her to bring it home. These calls won't and don't do you much good. Just sit tight. After confirming that they received the package wait a few weeks to call them again.

There will be a time lapse of two or three days in between the D-girl receiving the coverage and sending you your rejection letter which will state "Thank you for submitting _____ to us. While we found it compelling, it is not for us at this time. Best of luck with all your future endeavors!" During this time lapse if you call and have a conversation with the D-girl's assistant she may be so candid as to say, "Well, frankly, the coverage wasn't very strong." Which means that nobody read or will read your screenplay because "The coverage wasn't very strong." If this seems redundant then you're starting to get the picture: the D-girl pays someone like you to tell her that your screenplay sucks and that she shouldn't waste her time reading it because it sucks.

#5. Possible responses to your submission:

A. Via US Mail: "Thank you for submitting _____ to us. While we found it compelling, it is not for us at this time. Best of luck with all your future endeavors!" The best you can hope for in this situation is that they return the screenplay with the rejection letter. Ninety percent of the time this is the response you will receive.

B. Via telephone or fax: “We like it but we can’t do anything with it at this time.” This is the same as A.

C. Via telephone: “We like it but we can’t do anything with it at this time. Keep us posted.” This is the second best answer that you can hope for. The trouble is figuring out exactly what it means. It could mean that they would be willing to read a re-write or that they “can’t go with a first time director without talent attached” (more on this later). Most likely it means both.

D. Her assistant calls you: “Amy/Suzy/Jamie would like you to come in for a meeting. Are you available on Tuesday?” This is call for joy. Now you must spend the weekend taking a charm course and preparing answers for all of the many discrepancies and problems that D-girl will find with your screenplay and all of the excuses she will purport for not being able to produce it at this time.

E. D-girl herself calls: “Let’s do lunch.” You’re ecstatic, you’re elated - you can order anything you like. Even an appetizer. She really read it. She really likes it. Now you must spend the weekend taking a charm course and preparing answers for all of the many discrepancies and problems that D-girl will find with your screenplay and all of the excuses she will purport for not being able to produce it at this time.

F. The president of the company calls and offers you three million dollars for your original work and a first look deal on your next screenplay. Keep dreaming!

All of the negative responses you can decipher for yourself. Here’s what to do if she actually reads your work and agrees to meet with you: be so fucking professional that it would make your mother’s eyes bleed. Besides that you must convince her that you’re flavor of the month and that she’s missing out if she doesn’t lick you right then and there. Simple - innit?

Key to your conversation: know what’s universal and what’s particular about your work. Which essentially means that you should know why it’s similar to what an audience has already loved but what makes it sufficiently different (and preferably better) than that project or phenomenon.

Ninety percent of the time the meeting will end one of either two ways: Either “Don’t call us, we’ll call you” or “Keep us informed”. The other ten percent of the time will require champagne. “Don’t call us, we’ll call you” means that you flunked your job and should not expect to have any further contact with that company. This may or may not be (but probably is) a reflection on you as a human being. Maybe you had

spinach quesadilla caught in your teeth - maybe not. Maybe *she* had spinach quesadilla caught in her teeth - maybe not. You'll never know. And then there's always the possibility that the D-girl wanted to see you for another reason such as developing one of her own projects, either on spec (for free) or for pay; I've often been asked at the end of a meeting to "look over" one of the company's properties and once after a lengthy meeting with a producer about one of my screenplays he simply said, "Y'know, I don't really care about your script but I'd love for you to adapt this best-selling novel into a screenplay", which I did for WGA scale. "Keep us informed" means that they want to make sure that you're serious and dedicated and that they're 100% guaranteed not to lose their shirts (which they will in the end anyway) before they get involved. This means "Come back to us when you've done all of the legwork for us and we're assured to make our money back" which directly translates into "We can't go with a first time director without talent attached." Sadly, even companies that reject your screenplay will become re-interested if you can provided a "bankable commodity" such as an A-list player. Thus, the responsibility falls upon the first time director to "package" his project in the same manner that CAA would package a Tom Hanks/Ron Howard film to shop to Disney. However, most first time directors don't have the same resources as CAA.

Vanity Filmmaking: be aware that there are "producers" out there who will - for a fee or a percentage - help to "produce" your project. As with vanity publishing, this is not only for the vain but for the wealthy or for people who have access to wealth. Essentially these producers lend their name - IE, take producer credit - and line produce your film. At the end of the day, you're probably going to pay too much for what you receive and spend an enormous amount of time raising money. But if you have no experience then you may have no choice.

For their fee, the vanity producer will help you establish a Limited Liability Company and point you in the right direction to sucker individuals into investing in your highly speculative project. The proposed returns are so high only because the risk is so high. Before you enter into a situation like this, find out the producer's track record for getting domestic and international theatrical and video distribution for previous projects and find out how the investors did on the last few projects. Then ask yourself (honestly) if your project has less or more commercial viability than those projects. You'll probably find that the majority of those films were never distributed (with good reason) and that most of the investors lost most or all of their money.

So you decide to produce your film yourself using a Limited Liability Company or Limited Partnership. This may be the only viable way to independently produce your film. Beware: although some projects that you've probably heard about turn out very well for the investors, the company, and the filmmaker, the majority of

LLCs and LPs don't fare well. Sadly, the major problem lies not in raising the money and making the film - two things which are definitely not easy - but in getting it distributed. I mean, just look at independent films from some of the hundreds of festivals besides Cannes and Berlin, films that don't have distribution prior to the festival screening: what percentage of them were ever distributed? Ask some of your friends if they saw "Chameleon Street" which won Sundance a few years ago. Ask some of your friends if they saw any of the films that were shown at the New York, Chicago, Atlanta, AFI, and New Directors festivals last year.

Here's why the problem may not lie with you or your work: distributors distribute films to a finite numbers of screens and their costs for marketing and putting your film on the screen are astronomical; thus they are not willing or able to distribute films purely on the strength of their narratives or aesthetic content. Here's why the problem may not lie with distributors: the ticket-paying public goes to see their favorite celebrities playing variations of well-established characters, personas, or themes. For eight bucks they want the sure thing. Our storytelling culture has been largely supplanted by a pop culture of personalities where celebrities more often than not play psychological deviants or heros who face psychological deviants. Stories no longer sell movies, familiar and sexy faces do.

Is there any way to revise the established distribution network in order to allow more first time directors to have their films distributed? Not really. It would probably be easier to revise the Constitution than it would be to convince distributors to take risks on unproven actors and directors.

Thus, given your initial impotence when attempting to get your feature off of the ground without A-list talent attached, here is the main thing to keep in mind when approaching producers: Everybody is going to string you along without making a commitment until somebody else is willing to risk his/her career on your project. "We can't go with a first time director without talent attached" is what you'll most often hear, which directly translates into this: you beg various celebrities (meeting them is difficult enough) to sign onto your project for less than their usual rate thus risking their reputations and namesakes on your artistic integrity so that distributors won't lose their shirts (which they will in the end anyway).

Essentially, it all boils down to one thing for the first time writer/director: nobody will have enough faith in you to commit money to your project until somebody equally or more successful than her has already staked her career on you. Thus, if the project fails or loses money then the second person on can say, "Don't look at me! It was all X's idea - she signed on first!" And this is the key to getting your project off of the ground, finding the first noteworthy (bankable) producer or actor to have enough faith in your project to risk her/his career on you. Simple - innit?

Good luck.

Ira Israel